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School was always tough for José, but not because of the curriculum. He never felt terribly challenged by the assigned material, but he could not stand the ridicule that came with being in special education classes. José remembers being called “Special Ed” by other students or just “Ed” for short. He would make his way through high school, day by day, wishing he were in a place where he was treated as an equal. Upon graduation from high school, José tried his hand at auto mechanics at a local technical institution. Between the intensity of the labor and the greasy work environment, he decided there had to be something better. He heard about a new program at University of South Florida St. Petersburg that gave students an

José’s first peer mentor, Jon Ellington, was the newly elected student body president. He recognized the quality of José’s character and took him under his wing. Jon would always make time for the two of them to eat lunch, meet



José Cruz

with other students, talk with administrators, and even hang out on weekends. Jon knew of José’s passion for cooking, and often invited José to his house to prepare meals together. This relationship was special to José as it was the first time he felt like he belonged on a college campus.

During his time on campus, José did two internships: one at an animal shelter and the other at a local restaurant. Both experiences boosted his confidence and showed him that he had skills and talents.

José audited one class each semester. His first class was Environmental Science, where he learned about ecosystems and the importance of keeping them in balance. The structure of the class was new to José as there was a lot of group work and collaboration. The inclusive nature of the class made this course his favorite. He and his classmates made a field visit to Fort Desoto, where he and his academic mentor took samples of seawater.

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opportunity for continuing education on a regular college campus. He enrolled in “Project Stingray” and began a college experience that focused on self-determination, employment readiness, communication, and independent living skills. The program matches students with peer mentors, an academic mentor, and a community mentor. It also places students in on—and off-campus internships.

It wasn't until José took a course called Career Development that he realized he could have a career, not just a job. After months of in-class evaluations and company research, José narrowed his top two career interests to chef and firefighter. José and his academic mentor toured an upscale restaurant, where José was allowed to cook up some mussels using his own recipe. He also rode along with a St. Petersburg firefighter to explore the responsibilities of fire fighting. He toured the training facility, sprayed the hose, and climbed four stories to the top of a lookout tower. After realizing his lifelong struggle with asthma could get in the way of being a firefighter, José decided to become a chef.

College is not just about classes--it's also a time when many people create lifelong personal relationships. José was never shy, and when he saw a young woman reading a book in the student lounge, he asked if she wanted some company. The young woman, Erica, was a sophomore majoring in criminology and appreciated José's confidence. She became his girlfriend and almost two years later they are still going strong.

After his college program ended, José landed a full-time job with full benefits at the Don Cesar Hotel Resort, working in the kitchen. The decision to work full-time was not as clear and simple as you might think. José was under pressure from his mother to continue working part-time so that he would continue to receive Social Security benefits. His family's struggle with finances made the decision more complicated.

After carefully weighing his options and discussing the issue with people he trusted, José made his decision. José is now competitively employed and is the primary source of income for his mother and sister.

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